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Patrick Administration Urges Utilities to Extend Winter Shut-off
Protection for Low-Income Consumers
*DPU opens investigation seeking to expand low-income
energy service and efficiency programs*

BOSTON – Concerned that this winter’s high energy prices are particularly difficult for low-income, elderly and disabled residents, the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities (DPU) has asked each of the state’s electric and natural gas companies to extend until May 1 the current moratorium on winter utility shut-offs.

Under the DPU’s regulations, utility companies are prohibited from terminating service (for non-payment of balance due) for vulnerable consumers until the end of the winter heating season – March 15. In addition to urging utilities to extend the termination moratorium by approximately 45 days this year, the DPU opened an investigation that will examine utilities’ existing programs for low-income customers and seek ways to expand initiatives such as arrearage management programs, discount rates, service termination protections, and energy efficiency measures.

“In a year that is requiring everyone to dig deeper to pay rising energy bills, low-income, elderly and disabled consumers are especially at risk,” DPU Chairman Paul Hibbard said. “We are urging the Commonwealth’s utility companies to lend a hand during this particularly difficult year. At the same time, the department is launching an inquiry that we hope will yield new ways to save money for our most vulnerable customers through expanded energy efficiency and other assistance.”

The DPU, an agency of the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, plays a crucial role in overseeing public policies established to protect and support consumers of natural gas and electricity. The new investigation will explore ways to update and strengthen utility consumer protection laws and policies to help low-income consumers meet rising home energy costs and to develop a set of “best practices” for utility low-income programs. Details of the inquiry, titled “Expanding Low-Income Consumer Protections and Assistance, Including

Standards for Arrearage Management Programs, Discount Rate, Service Termination and Energy Efficiency Programs,” will be posted soon at www.mass.gov/dpu.

The DPU sent letters requesting extension of the service termination moratorium until May 1 to the following utility companies: Blackstone Gas, Berkshire Gas, NSTAR Gas & Electric, National Grid USA, NiSource Gas (Bay State Gas), Unitil (Fitchburg Gas & Electric), and Western Massachusetts Electric Company.

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